

Damien Tavis Toman



NEW MEDITATIONS ON RELIGION



As Derived from Conversations with Various
Correspondents During the Month of December, 2008



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On Religion



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ON PSEUDO-MARCIONISM

Speaking for myself alone, it is the idea of God as the rule-maker and enforcer that makes it so difficult for me to identify and interact with other Christians. I was accused (or complimented) by another correspondent today of being a "modern-day Gnostic," which I think was extremely perceptive of her. An irony of my spiritual journey is that it was in part the study of Gnosticism that propelled me into my long, dark slide away from Christ, but that it was a renewed interest in Gnosticism that, once I had reaffirmed my original faith, allowed me to address my doubts reasonably, and keep myself from falling again. I re-entered, in other words, by the same door by which I had exited. Unfortunately, certain of my religious perspectives - in particular as regards ritual observances and the spiritual relevance of large portions of the traditional Biblical canon - are quite incompatible with those of most mainstream Christians. I find myself almost wholly sympathetic with the Marcionist school, in that I view the entirety of the Old Testament as being not only irrelevant to Christian belief and practice, but actually consecrated to a different deity altogether - a tribal god known only to the Hebrews, and relevant only to the Hebrews. I am persuaded by the argument that the Heavenly Father Jesus spoke of is not the same YHWH (Jehova, Adonai, Yahweh, etc.) worshiped by his ancestors, invoked by Moses, and referenced in the Torah and the Talmud. How can they be, when they are of entirely opposite natures?

I admit that the heretical luxury of dispensing with the first three-quarters of the common Bible is helpful in quelling many if not all of the most perturbing contradictions

contained therein. The rest are generally done away with by peering into the history and probable authorship of the remaining Gospels, epistles, and so forth, and realizing that while they are very helpful in establishing Christian theology, they are neither the first words nor the final words on anything. As long as we remember the Lord's Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount, I figure that we are relatively safe from error and the perils of presumption. This is, of course, a subjective and essentially intuitive opinion. I am simply too cowardly to view God as anything but infinitely merciful, loving, and good. And because our world is so far from being merciful, loving, and good, I am obliged to conclude that the True God is not the god of this world, and that he takes no portion in it. The whole of the Father's involvement with our miserable planet consists of the announcement of the Kingdom through the incarnation of Jesus, and the subsequent impartation of the Holy Spirit through which the Kingdom is made continuously known. Beyond this, human beings are entirely responsible for their own affairs. The end of the world will be a strictly human event. Neither the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit will have the slightest hand in it.



ON THE CONUNDRUM OF THE EXODUS

I have the task before me of explaining my theology to someone who's theology is less charitable and more charitable than mine. In essence, I'll be arguing against myself. "It is not God's responsibility to be sympathetic toward us," I used to say. "It is our responsibility to be sympathetic toward him, however brutal and irrational His actions appear."

But I was reading Exodus, you see, and here was God, bringing all these plagues down upon Egypt because the Pharaoh wouldn't release the Hebrews into the wilderness. So there would be a plague, and the people would suffer horribly, and the Pharaoh would be ready to release the Hebrews. And then it would say, "But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, so he would not let the Israelites go." And then God would call down another plague, and the people would suffer horribly, and Pharaoh would again be ready to repent, except that God would harden his heart again, and so on. Finally God came down and personally killed every firstborn human and animal in Egypt, except for those belonging to the Hebrews, and - apparently satisfied - stopped hardening Pharaoh's heart, so that he could release the Israelites as he had long intended to do.

And I couldn't help but wonder why the Book would say that it was the Lord that hardened Pharaoh's heart, and the Lord that tortured and slaughtered the people of Egypt, unless it was really the Lord Himself that did these things. Unless it really was the Lord Himself who intentionally orchestrated events so that He would have to do these things. He gave Himself the choice to give Himself no choice.

I suppose I understand that Faith requires us to believe the unbelievable, and to accept the incomprehensible, and - it seems - to condone and even celebrate the morally unthinkable, so long as it is interpreted as the Work of the Lord; so long as it fits into the Divine Plan. (After all, I was recently reminded, what is the Passover but a celebration of the slaughter of all those Egyptian babies and animals?) I

suppose I can understand that Faith requires us to love
unconditionally a God who utilizes savagery and atrocity for
the advancement of a dusty little troop of querulous
nomads. I suppose.

There is a risk to be taken in assuming that the Father Jesus
spoke of is not the same entity as the YHWH that guides and
protects and punishes and torments the Israelites
throughout the pages of the Torah. One could say that I am
somehow underestimating the Lord's nature by contending
that it does not include the capacity for bestiality and
viciousness: by saying that these are traits that exist in you
and in me and in our carnal, corrupt, polluted natures, but
not in the Nature of One who is truly Above, truly Beyond,
truly Outside, truly Good and Holy.

But if I am damning myself, I must look through the pages
of Exodus, and I must wonder: is it I who am damning
myself, or is it God who is causing me to be damned for His
glory, and the glory of His people, whoever they happen to
be? If I do not know my own heart, what do I know? If I do
not control my own heart, what do I control? And if I know
nothing and control nothing, then how can I have a choice?
And if I have no choice, how can I love? How can I follow
the Great Commission, which is, in essence, to give people a
choice to love or not love - if there is no choice?

We arrived here so long ago, my darling. It feels as if we'll
never leave.



ON THE NATURE OF THE DEITY

Let us first establish this much. You said, "If God was simply mercy and grace, we would have license to do whatever we want - murder, rape, incest, bestiality, etc. That, personally, is not a world I would like to live in." My answer, depressingly enough, is that that *is* the world we live in. We do have such a license. There is nothing but our own laws and the limitations of nature to prevent us, and nothing but our own laws and the limitations of nature to punish us. In other words, there is no Old Testament Jehovah who will blast us from the face of the earth for acting in a way that is terrible, cruel, and repugnant (even though murder, rape, and incest were common behaviors for some of the patriarchs of the Old Testament, and they were blest abundantly by Jehovah.) We may very well get our due for defying the edicts of society and decency, but there is no particular reason to infer God's direct influence if we are put into jail, or if we contract a disease, or if we die miserable and alone in a world that no longer wants us.

Here, though, is the clincher. Because the True God is of a nature that rejects anything but the purest and most refined spiritual substance, anything less than this - anything that is mingled with any lower, cruder, imperfect substance - cannot resume its place with the Creator, and is therefore denied the Kingdom. We here in the material universe - the universe of cells and molecules and stars and nebulae - are at the extreme end of a very, very long chain of corruptions, by which we are separated from the Original substance of the Uncreated Father (the Pleroma, as the ancient Gnostics sometimes called it.) We are all essentially related to the Father, just as all things are, but we are in essence mutations. In order to return to Him, we must be entirely

divested of all the dross and excrement that has accumulated upon our perfect core beings, as we have journeyed downward through the many stages of imperfection. This world, with all of its murder, rape, incest, and bestiality, is only the beginning; which is not to say that things cannot get worse. But we have the choice to begin evolving upward again, and obeying the laws of nature, morality, virtue, and Godliness (in other words, obeying Christ's teachings) is the first, all-important step. It will hopefully prevent us from descending further, to the realm of the demons - the proud and unrepentant haters of the True and Uncreated God.

The only real difference between this and conventional Judaeo-Christian theology, is that the Uncreated is no longer assumed to be an actor, because He is totally beyond the stage and everyone on it. He is known but unknowable. Though there is nothing that is not made of His original substance, everything around us, with the exception of our original souls, is effectively a perversion of that essence, twisted and distorted to resemble something good that is not good, something real that is not real. Luckily we have such perfected examples as Christ to direct our attentions back to the Source beyond the source.

To me, the easiest, and therefore probably the worse option, is to settle for a painful contradiction that makes you wince every time it comes up, but is considered too sacred to confront. This can only hinder us in the journey toward perfection, and bind us to the very stumbling stones that we need to overstep. If somebody asks us what God has to do with terrorism and abortion and genocide and famine and global warming and stampeding Hindus and everything else - where these fit into God's plan - I think we should be able

to say that God's only plan, so far as we are concerned, is for each of us to return to Him, and that the only path back to Him is Love, and our example and guide in Love is Christ, and beyond this, we know nothing for certain. Gnosticism is all about knowing - knowing what you know, and knowing what you do not and cannot know (yet.)



ON THE NATURE OF THE DEITY, CONTINUED

I must say that I am enjoying our conversation about the nature of God. More than once, I have read your answers to my own statements, and been dismayed at finding points that I am little-prepared to dispute. Often, this is because you so convincingly reassert arguments that I heard from my parents, pastors, etc., when I was younger, which confounded me to the point of anger, and which I have since found it difficult to counter without recalling the acrid passion that they first aroused. I confess, very humbly, that it is possible - in fact probable - that I am still angry at God, just as any son might be angry with a father whom he loves unswervingly nevertheless. This may be a function of my being of the male sex. Just as men and women are apt to think differently of romance, it is conceivable that they are more or less bound to find themselves on different ground as regards religion, too. I have learned how attached women are to the beatified notion of "trust." It is easier for them to have faith, and worse for them when they lose it. I wonder how many Christian men there are who have gone years or decades serving God ardently, while having no faith at all. As for myself, I serve Him neither well nor faithfully. The Christianity that is in my blood too infrequently finds its way to my head, my heart, or my hands. I love Jesus

desperately; he has been with me always. But my pride guards the doorway with a cleaver in its hands, and I fear what would be lobbed away if I were to make a charge.

With painful accuracy, you lay a pommel to the ancient bruises that have so long made my spirit and my intellect the most hateful of enemies. The God that I can believe in is not the God that I can love, and vice versa. I am willing to lower the shield of my apparent Deism a little, and admit that, if Jesus be any evidence of direct intervention, there is no denying that God still insinuates Himself upon human affairs, however undetectably. Kick away this crutch, however, and what sprouts in its stead is a heresy worse than any I have mentioned before: namely, that I have my doubts regarding the miraculous birth of Jesus, and my suspicion that his true divinity was more subtly expressed and revealed than his biographers were willing to transmit. I would in essence have to admit that I regard him as more than a prophet, but not quite the direct and undiluted progeny of Heaven. It is most important, perhaps, that I call him the founder of my religion and epitome of its worth to men. To say this alone, of course, would reduce Christianity to the point of mere philosophy - not unlike Confucianism or Buddhism, which have also been made religions by the generations succeeding their inception, just as their founders have been called deities and the offspring of deities. What am I to say? How am I to countenance so damning, so abhorrent, so murderous a betrayal of my heart's first hope? I'm the smallest of men, swallowed up without a sound by the shadow of history and its impregnable ark of secrets. But blessed is he who has not seen, and yet believes.

And so you are right. I'm an infidel as well as an adulterer.

I have only ever been fit to describe the Kingdom from my place in the abyss, living my life as a remorseful wraith. Love itself condemns me. One enters into the Mystery not to find the solution, but to be himself dissolved - which, indeed, I have been. What interests me is escaping from the onus of justifying a God who neither requires nor accepts any justification from men. This is why I persist in saying that, just as all of man's laws are written with the end of creating (or at least inspiring) order, so are God's. Since God is the All, I can only suppose that God's definition of order is the restitution of the All to the All, which is accomplished through Perfection, Re-birth, Ascent - abstractions employed in the scriptures of all times and all places, to indicate to us in our ignorance and indolence the necessary direction of all our endeavors, namely *upward and outward*. If I seem a little unconcerned with the eventual (or ultimate) worth (or worthlessness) of our actions here on the terrestrial plane, or our interpretations of the causes of actions not our own, it is because it is less painful and more advantageous, I think, to consider them on the scale of *an eternity that must be measured according to the limits of God's mercy, which is necessarily illimitable*. On earth, I suffer in earthly ways for earthly errors. On what remains to be suffered, and to what lengths, hereafter, I have neither the wisdom nor the temerity to penetrate.

I will merely add that there is no use discarding Jesus as evidence of God's presence within and influence upon man. What remains to be wondered, is whether we must regard that presence as selective, or that influence as temporary. In other words, whether God, being present and active among all peoples at all times, can really be said to have been *particularly* present among some peoples and *particularly*

active in some times, to the exclusion or diminution of others. Was Jesus' influence upon man a result of human history or Divine authorship, especially if God is to be regarded as the one certain Constant? It is not a thing to be known; merely asked. Either way, God's love and faithfulness is - we hope - unaltered and indubitable.



ON FUTURITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

I have been occupying my few moments of leisure with readings from a book my father gave me, called *The Universe Next Door*, by a certain Dr. Sire - a defender of orthodox Christianity in the academic sphere. In the course of summarizing Sire's unmistakably (and, I suppose, properly) slanted perspective of every important religious and philosophic worldview, the book addresses many of the same questions with which you and I have dallied in our recent correspondences. Without further advancing any of my own mangled apostasies, I should say that I am reminded of how many of the world's mightiest intellects have been persuaded by forces both internal and external, to believe in and propagate every possible system of explaining the material universe and the nature of man. Great minds do not think alike after all. C.S. Lewis was certainly no less a genius than Bertrand Russell, but their ideas of God and just about everything else could not have been more opposed to each other. It may well be that, despite all appearances and arguments to the contrary, the decision to accept or deny faith, or any of its particularities, never resides with the intellect. It must be largely a matter of whether one feels safer in a universe that is irregular despite its having a conscious Regulator, or a universe that is surprisingly

regular, despite its being unconscious and unregulated. I have looked within myself and seen that I am without the courage to face a Godless reality. Others - my superiors, perhaps - have found that there is nothing of which they could conceive that is more terrifying to them, than the thought of a deity, who uses His omniscience to scour us for sins, and his omnipotence to guide us to our obliteration.

Someday I will undertake a long treatise, in which I will explain far better than I can here, why it is that I find the cherishing of individuality (however guilty of it I myself undoubtedly am) to be nothing but the very defining mark of man's sinfulness, and why I can therefore not conceive of a reason that Heaven would have any place for it. Let it suffice for now that I find all of my own errors to have originated with self-love, or self-hatred, or the self-consciousness and self-interest that has allowed for both. Everything that divides me from God is something that binds me to my idea of self; everything that draws me toward God is something that brings me to forget myself, and to conform my sense of being with the imponderable immensity of the universe, so that, by wholly misplacing my knowledge of self within it, I can attain to a knowledge of the Whole. I think that it is a mistake to say that we have a specific "place" in God's universe, or to say that God loves us for the same silly and mainly insipid reasons that we may be tempted to love ourselves. In our smallness, we have come to appreciate God's glory by the incalculable variety with which it is made manifest. In truth, however, the bedazzling multiplicity of creation does nothing to contribute or detract from the glory of the Creator, and we can add nothing to His glory by counting ourselves as unique in the midst of it. There is a dangerous (or at least foolish) level of hubris in

expecting that God is so trivial as to love us *because* we feel ourselves to be unique. God's love would be our inescapable birthright whether we were born as distinct and matchless archetypes, or indistinguishable, featureless blobs. It is ours because we are a result of it; it is not, I say, a result of anything we are or can do. Is it not enough for us to be constructed of the same matter as the raging stars, the ageless sea? Is it not enough to be of one substance with the angels? We can write our names in the constellations, but the tongue in which we wrote them will fall into obsolescence, and the constellations themselves will sputter out like spent coals, and the universe will be gathered up into God's fist like a clump of wild grapes, and will be ground to pulp in His teeth, and swallowed, and digested, and expurgated again, to fertilize the next crop of galaxies and quarks. Everything we are is a transient phenomenon within a permanent and immutable Nature. It is by forgetting who we think we are, that we remember what we have always been.

It's monstrously ungrateful, really, to expect that we would be left very long with our earthly sense of self, after all earthly application for such a sense has been expended. If we ourselves are deposited into a broader spiritual fabric when our bodies fall victim to material decay, ought we not to expect that our idea of self will be broadened to encompass our new reality? If, as the Scriptures say, we are to be given perfect bodies - what possibility is there for individuality, in something that is perfect? Isn't perfection absolute and singular? There is no such thing as a perfect tree, or a perfect snowflake, or a perfect human being, because these are all material objects, which are defined and differentiated only according to their flaws, which is to say,

their points of individuality. As a human being, I am incapable of being perfected; my efforts to overcome my flaws can only and ideally succeed in allowing me to reduce the friction that exists between myself and the rest of humanity, and the rest of the material world, as a result of our innumerable inconsistencies and incompatibilities. To say that everyone in Heaven has been perfected, is to say that there is nothing left of them that can stand between them and each other, or them and God. Wherefore, then, comes this individuality?

When Kierkegaard said that, upon his demise, his epitaph ought to read "Here Lies the Individual," I trust that he was sufficiently enlightened to conceive that "The Individual" of whom he speaks was indeed left in the grave, to molder there forever. For myself, I do not believe that my individuality is so exalted a thing, as to deserve immortal preservation. What little of me there is that is God's will return to Him one way or another. My follies, vanities, smallnesses and eccentricities He surely has no need of.



ON THE DIVINITY OF THE CHRIST

As you cleverly anticipated, your argument regarding what Jesus must have been, if he were not the literal and singular progeny of God, was verbatim to that which my father used to recite, while he went about his duty of trying to convert such unlucky persons as he had engaged in conversation. The more I heard it, the more I began to question its utility. The indispensability of Jesus' teachings is not, I do not think, confounded by any notion we may have of his claims to divinity. If he was a liar, then his was the only lie ever told

that was truly good, and that the credulous were better for accepting. If he was a lunatic, then his lunacy was a thousand times preferable to reason. We in our noxious little democracies, we drag men from offices that they have sold their lives in attaining, and in which they have done recognizable benefit, because they have been found to have told an untruth or suffered some moral relapse in a matter quite irrelevant to the duties they perform for the public they serve. We're as wicked as the Pharisees - calling Jesus' miracles crimes, because they were done on the day of rest. Our world is sufficiently complex, and there are a sufficient number of mysteries that will go eternally unilluminated, that we are not to regard it as strange or prodigious, if we are all following liars and lunatics - so long as we are following them in a true and sensible direction. As the Lord said, a tree shall be known for its fruit. There is much in Christianity that has become unmistakable falsehood and lunacy in the hands of its inheritors. Its Founder, whatever his mind and whatever his purpose, did nothing but good, and gained nothing but evil for it. Such is a lie and a lunacy worth living for and dying for, I say.

When I say that the Christianity that is in my blood too rarely influences the work of my hands, heart, and mind, I am simply acknowledging that Christianity is as much a habitual and sentimental affect of my European heritage and religiously-immersed childhood, as it is a personal choice. If I am not a Buddhist, or a Zoroastrian, or a Taoist, it is not because I have found these paths to be devoid of truth and meaning; it is because I explored them thoroughly, and found that I couldn't relate to them to the point of lucidity and transport, the way I can when meditating upon Jesus, and participating in the traditions he inspired. The cross

speaks to my heart like no other symbol; the Bible soothes my tempestuous soul like no other book. As I read *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, I am charmed almost to tears by the effluence of 18th-Century piety within its pages - with characters dropping to their knees in profoundest devotion at the flimsiest provocation. I love Christianity for its excesses and vanities, as much as for its priceless truths and irresistible promises. A religion as replete with pestilence, defilement, misuse, and calumny as this one must, alas, be adored and forgiven for the grandeur of its externalities.



ON FRIENDSHIP

Sometimes a new friendship can be uncannily like a new birth. An infant arrives into its mother's arms screaming unpleasantly and covered in blood and slime, its eyes fastened shut and its mouth curled into a permanent grimace. As the days progress, however, and various indescribable communications pass between the child and its bearer, the anguish and terror experienced by both are washed into the Lethean waters of forgetfulness, and what remains is a bond that transcends the need for definition or justification. The best of friendships, I have found, are salvaged from the mire of antipathy; their basis is in shared forgiveness, and therefore shared sympathy. (I would say this of marriages as well... but where would it get me?)

Carrying the metaphor further, our relationship with Jesus is, in this regard, precisely like any other friendship. It is never achieved easily. We all know that Jesus must forgive us the unforgivable; in an abstract way, He must forgive us for murdering Him... even with the knowledge that we will

murder Him again the next time we inevitably sin. We will send him to the cross a hundred times a day, and entomb him, and deny him while he lies awaiting resurrection. But it is less often remembered that, in our arrogance and inherent vileness, we must forgive Jesus as well. We must forgive Him for requiring the impossible of us: faith, which is beyond our understanding, and virtue, which is beyond our physical capability. We must forgive him for holding us to a higher standard than we can possibly attain, and demanding that we humble ourselves to Him for help in attaining it. It is precisely because the hurdles of forgiveness are so astronomically, inconceivably high, that our friendship with our Savior is the sweetest and most indispensable we will ever have.



ON THE IDEA OF SELF

It has been a preoccupying object of my adult life to achieve what might best be referred to as a sense of personal coherence: to be assured that someone could read a letter or an essay from me, or listen to any of my records (on either end of the wide musical spectrum that I've occupied), and then meet me in person, and not be faced with any shocking incongruities. I consciously maintain a certain foppish affectation of appearance, for instance, to reflect the eccentricities that are typical of my writing. I try to be self-contained and self-defining, stoically unmoved both by the ephemerality of society and circumstance, and by the ceaselessly shifting currents that underlie the whole of my individual being. After years of this earnest, agonized questing for the golden prize of personal consistency, though, all that I've gotten is a cruel lesson in human error.

At my best, I am a sardonic self-caricature. At my worst, I am a shameless dissimulator.

I have tried, of course, to resemble no one but Jesus, and have found the effort ridiculous. Even Jesus' closest disciples had characters, personality traits, habits and opinions of their own. By assembling and combining their various accounts and letters, we have arrived at what is considered a thorough, legal, and orthodox view of the essential truths of Christianity. But if any one of the gospels, or any one of the epistles, were extracted and taken on its own as solely revelatory and solely relevant, it would - and has, as in the case of Marcionism - result in the formulation of a unique idea of Christianity, irreconcilable to more inclusive or generalized schools. The addition of one apocryphal gospel to the established Canon would open the gates of chaos. So miniscule a point as when in one's lifespan one ought to receive holy baptism or other such essentially external sacraments, has resulted in horrible schisms, and the imponderable exchange of brutalities between sects. These are the effects when followers of the same Messiah cannot agree with each other; but they are no less terrible when one of us cannot agree with himself. A single inner schism - a lingering doubt, a trifling quibble - can spark a seething inner rebellion that can fatally distract any of us from receiving our salvation. How many have lost their souls for the sake of a single unanswered question?

In pursuing a cogent and undistorted idea of myself, then, my only important concern should be whether what I see resembles, or is acceptable to Christ. Do I love God? Do I love my neighbor? Do I give freely? Do I receive gratefully? Do I hate sin in all its forms? Do I acknowledge

and repent of the sins that I commit?

How is it that I can, in perfect honesty, answer "yes" to all of these questions, and still feel hopelessly distant from my Savior? Hopelessly distant and utterly damned. How? You say that I am kind and sensitive, but I know that I am vicious, contemptuous, and cruel. You say that I'm insightful; but I know that I'm as blind as the day I was born. The light that I project is a mockery. The truths that I pronounce are nothing but vacant syllables. My very smile is a stumbling-stone. There is nothing in me that is recognizable to the Lord. He never knew me at all... I am less than a stranger.

Laying this aside (for what else can I do?), I have never spoken to a person as genuinely humble and desirous for the mercy of Christ as you show yourself to be. I know that the struggle is the same for every Christian, but so few of us achieve real humility; so few of us spend every minute of every hour of every day heartbroken before the Lord, sobbing with bottomless contrition, cleansing His wounds with the salt of our tears. It all sounds very severe and archaic, I realize, but really - what else can save us? What else can keep us from the temptation to save ourselves?

You may think of me as a "perfect stranger," and it is doubtless proper that you do. But the truth behind the truth is that you already know me as well as you know yourself. I'm as old as the first chapter of the first book ever written. I'm as old as the stones that covered the bruised face of Abel. I belonged to this world from the moment I sinned, and no talent I possess can disinter me from its wormy bowels. Plainly speaking, I have no surprises. And if I were

at all sensible, I would have no hopes, either.

I Thank God, then, that I'm an idiot.



ON THE TOPIC OF LOVE

I find that, in my life and in my correspondences, I return again and again to the subject of love - debating its existence and form, the way that some would debate the form and existence of a Creator. Without going back and looking, I could say with relative certainty that more than half of my book of observations is occupied with this topic, with the rest divided between such subjects as religion, political theory, existential alienation, and the like. Love is the supreme subject. It must therefore be the supreme calling: the thing that matters first, the thing that matters last, the thing that matters most. To find love in someone else - to discover and expand the bounds and the depths of our own love - to make the ultimate theological leap of seeing nothing but love in a God whose methods and motives can seem so inconceivably cruel and meaningless. It is as you say: what else is there? We are beings of endless love and endless loneliness, at war with ourselves, perplexed by each other, yearning for the Wholeness from which we were sprung - the Mystery in which there is no Paradox.

Whether this truly has anything to do with men and women, I am no longer so certain of. Perhaps love is too great a treasure and too great a responsibility to be entrusted to anyone but Christ. When I think of my ex-wife, as I know her now and as I knew her before, a crushing surge of feelings overtakes me: shame, rage, envy, hatred, adoration,

fools.

supply.



ON HEAVEN

walk streets of gold, it would be difficult to define how our

differences may be helpful to us or anybody else in a realm of pure spirit - or even why anyone would require the help of which you speak. Here on earth, it may certainly be argued that life is made both better and worse, in various ways and on different occasions, by the fact of our each possessing different origins, which lend themselves to different talents, proclivities, and tastes. But if everything that is true of earth is true of Heaven as well, why not just stay on earth? Why graduate to a new state of being, if it is nothing more than a somewhat improved version of the old? Here on earth we may impress each other and even please God by our individual abilities - dancing, juggling oranges, baking pies, performing difficult mathematical equations, etc. But does Heaven have variety shows? Does it have bakeries? Does it have universities? Does God sit in dim booths, or munch on cream puffs, or puzzle through lectures with His pencil in His teeth? Are we to resign ourselves to the "paradise earth" of the Jehovah's Witnesses, with its lunatic vignettes of men in pastel golf shirts, tending crops of vegetables, while Dutch girls in wooden clogs feed wildflowers to Kimono dragons?

It may be that it is useless for us to venture a picture of Heaven, simply because our earth-bound imaginations possess no context from which to generate a state of being in which there are no physical limits by which to be contained or defined. You seem to mistake the idea of our consciousnesses being expanded beyond ourselves, with that of losing our consciousness completely - i.e., "becoming mindless zombies or becoming nothing again." If we go to join the Consciousness of God, we are gaining increased consciousness, and our former state of isolated being is not to be mourned. If our perceived individuality is rejoined to

the One Real Individuality, which is God, then how is that to be considered "becoming nothing?" Everything we are that is worthy of eternal existence, is so because it matches God's substance. Whatever flack remains will be burnt up in His glory. Creation is nothing if not the Supreme and Original act of Self-expression. What else could Heaven be but a return to the Self that expressed us? As it is now, my consciousness is not prepared to accept or conceive of the idea of eternity. Nobody's is. While we are living temporally, it is only right that we should think temporally. But when we go to Eternity, and we must think eternally, it seems proper to say that we will need to be furnished with a consciousness that is itself eternal. Since God is the only Eternal, whose consciousness can we then be given but His? This is really nothing but elementary dialectics - but how else can we consider these things but reasonably? Or, to paraphrase Sherlock Holmes, when everything that cannot be true has been eliminated, what remains must be the truth - however incomprehensible or unalluring it may be.



ON THE CHRISTIAN IN SOCIETY

If it is erroneous to say that we ought to be saints in regards to others and tyrants in regards to ourselves, then it is an error derived from a sincere and punctilious attention to the words of Christ. Without continuously reminding ourselves of the sins that we repeatedly commit, and praying for the fortitude to stand firm against temptation, we will never achieve the humility required of us, to be exemplars of Christ's mercy. More than anything on earth, Jesus disliked

hypocrites. The assumption that - because one is a Christian - one is automatically and instantaneously forgiven for all transgression, past, present, and future, seems to me like an abuse of the grace offered by God. True, His grace is infinite - but it is also made clear that we ought not to tempt or mock it by providing ourselves indulgences (to borrow the old Catholic institution), with the expectation that forgiveness will inevitably follow. The Lord's Prayer has us asking that God not lead us into temptation. I assume this to mean that, as prayers of that prayer and believers in its efficacy, if we are led into temptation, then it is not God doing the leading. If God is not "delivering us from evil," then we are delivering ourselves into it - one way or another. Naturally, the real-world scenarios by which this argument may be upheld or refuted are too numerous to ponder - but the extremest form of faith is that which holds that there is nothing truly evil that can happen to a believer, however afflicted and maligned by circumstances he or she may appear. This works very well when applied to such things as wars and persecutions and plagues and disasters, but what about purportedly pleasurable evils - that is, the sensuous temptations with which our conversation began? These are invariably cases in which two people volunteer to become agents in each others' possible demise and damnation, both acting in ignorance or refusal of God's will, which is that we not be tempted. I find myself regarding sexual sin as especially terrible and ruinous because (when it is not an act of violation or aggression), it is effectively a godless vacuum created by the willful temptation and acquiescence to temptation of two persons simultaneously. It is a reciprocal exchange of equally grievous evils, by which each party's subsequent seeking and acceptance of grace is likely to be confounded by the continued recalcitrance of the other.

At any rate, anyone who has read the *Tao Te Ching* is likely to agree that the saint has no trouble accepting that the world belongs to tyrants, and the tyrant has no choice but to admit his powerlessness over saints. The two work hand-in-hand to put the world in its proper order, with the world above receiving no greater preference or attention than the world below. The truth is, the roles of the saint and the tyrant are ideally opposite to what we might have assumed. It is the saint that holds himself and his people to the highest and holiest of standards, and the tyrant that - knowing his power to be ephemeral - reflects and demonstrates the mercy that we would like to be shown by God. To be a saint to others and a tyrant to oneself, then, is to live in condemnation of the world, but to forgive the influence that the world inevitably has upon oneself. The vital component to all of this, of course, is a sense of equanimity. We are only allowed to hate ourselves as much as we hate the world, and vice versa.

I appreciate and agree with your apparent nostalgia for a world in which the most powerful institutions were either the Church, or governments interconnected with and devoted to the Church. I have long been a defender of the notion that a society that is obsessed with religion and fraught with hypocrisy, is still better off than a society that is obsessed with science and inured to immorality. The inevitability of disparity and inequality is easier to bear when it is assumed that Divine justice lies somewhere behind it. In this regard, however, I will venture to suggest that the Protestants and the Catholics have more in common than meets the eye. It is arguable that the Catholic and Orthodox traditions have a longer and more historically sacrosanct cultural history from which to draw inspiration

and strength in facing modern problems, and that history ought undeniably to be a source of enviable comfort to those whose privilege it is to enjoy it. In their own spheres, they may revel in the meaningless conceits of any power that once had claim to an empire. But the Protestants were not always and invariably politically impotent sects of dissidents, rebels, and secessionists. The Prussian Empire was Protestant, as was the British. For that matter, the United States, in their original incarnation, were wholly Protestant, to the degree that Catholics were persecuted mercilessly until the turn of the 19th Century, when they became too great in number to effectively repress. Regardless of which denomination any given culture owes its original allegiance to, Catholics and Protestants alike have had their due time of prevalence over the social mainstream, and have suffered roughly equal levels of distortion and dilution thereby. The Catholics, who see children as a blessing from God, struggle with abortion and population control. The Protestants, who tend to see wealth as blessing from God, struggle with avarice and exploitation. The Marxists try to circumvent all of this by eliminating God, only to bloody their noses upon the unanticipated obstacle of free expression and individual happiness. The problem is not with any given ideology, but with ideology itself. When a philosopher goes to the bar, and gets drunk, and begins to complain aloud, what he says is, "Damned ideologies! Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em." Somehow we must satisfy ourselves with the conclusion that there is no shame in deciding upon a definite path, even if one knows that one will never see where it ends. One may enjoy the beauty of the sunrise without needing to be burnt up in it.

Concluding where we began, I prefer not to see my life (or anybody's) as a swashbuckling, daredevil escapade, on which Jesus is the wise and patient sidekick, waiting to toss us a rope when we've bumbled overboard, or a penetrating maxim when our prospects look bleak. I am not of the school that considers life to be a "training course" for the perfection to come. Death and Judgment are never more than a half-breath away, and I doubt that God will see the humor in our bravado when He's forced to turn His gaze from us and give us to the Devil that we spent our lives carousing with, while always promising to save the last dance for the Savior. That's not personal growth as I see it. One thing I've noticed about the Gospels' depictions of Christ is that he's always terribly serious, and quite an absolutist. He saves the adulteress from being stoned, but when he says "Go and sin no more," he means it. Otherwise he would have said, "Go and try not to sin quite as much anymore." He makes a fig tree wither because it's too young to bear fruit - as if to say that unreadiness is no excuse. It is enough to be in His presence only once; after that, your fate is in your own hands.

With that in mind, I must say that I have little faith in the individual to decide when it is best to seriously devote himself to the benefit and salvation of his fellow man. I would rather see a society that holds holiness, sanctity, and peacefulness as the unified goal of all persons, rather than wade my way through a carnival of idiots, who have all decided to take their time and soak up a few fleeting pleasures on the way. Boredom is the result of having too much to do and no will to do it.



ON RELIGION AND SOCIETY

I have not yet made up my mind on the question of whether human beings are "basically good." Goodness is, it seems, a term defined by society for society's sake: people are generally called "good," who manage to override their own most basic desires and impulses, either for the general betterment of society (as by respecting laws), or for the benefit of a specific person or group of persons (as by such charitable acts as your family experienced after the fire.) In Christianity, this fulfills the tenet of "loving one's neighbors as one loves oneself." To the Christian idea of goodness, however, there is compounded the additional requirement of "loving God with all one's heart," which is somewhat harder to justify on a social level. Not that loving a God whose existence is continuously called into question can really do very much harm to a person; but it is difficult to demonstrate how it can be said to do any direct good, either.

When [after a house-fire] you and your family found yourselves so warmly embraced and richly benefited by strangers and near-strangers who made no profession to faith, I doubt that you bothered to ask them whether or not religious belief inspired their magnanimity, and if it did, to what degree. There are many persons who carry within themselves a sincere faith in God, and a desire to give Him glory in their daily actions, who nevertheless are not inclined to preach, or to seek conversions in the persons to whom they show kindness. They trust (consciously or intuitively) that God will be manifest, and His goodness reflected, in the things that they do. In Jesus' words, they are "known by their fruit," even though it isn't obvious by what subterranean spring their roots are watered.

The truth is that, argue though you might about the place, function, and prominence of religion in the foundation of Western culture (or any culture), if you dig to the core of any successful civilization, you are bound to find a religious and philosophical basis-point upon which that civilization was established, and to which it must continuously (if inconspicuously) refer, if its strength is to be retained. The United States, for instance, may no longer be an expressly and uniformly Christian nation, but that doesn't change the fact that many of our laws, and our most broadly held ideas of personal freedom and social justice, were codified by persons of faith, and inspired by the beliefs and practices thereof. Of course, many others were owed to more ignoble sources like greed, power-lust, prejudice, and inflated self-interest. But the fact that no President has yet been elected without claiming in unmistakable terms to be a man of strong religious (namely Christian) convictions, shows very well how uncomfortable even our undeniably secular (or, as you say, "modern") society is with the notion of being ruled by someone who regards humanity as being the supreme force in the universe. We cannot, in other words, bring ourselves to trust a man who can trust no one higher than himself. It may be interesting to note that the same is not true of our governors, congressmen, senators, etc. - because they already have human authorities to whom they must report. When it comes to the highest office, though, we are not satisfied until we have seen and heard our President throw himself upon the mercy of an office higher than his own - whether we ourselves really believe in such a divine power or not. We are never so evolved as to deprive the paramount post of its sacredness - one might say, its divine mandate.

You seem to be saying that, if only human beings could get over their propensity for religious belief and practice, all violence, cruelty, injustice, and hatred would come to a spontaneous end. Israelite and Palestinian, Indian and Pakistani, Chinese Maoist and Tibetan Buddhist - all would shake off the blinkers of ancient animosity, dissolve the borders that held them apart, and realize their true brotherhood. It's an intriguing theory, and it certainly seems to have had John Lennon convinced. Personally, I find it simplistic and incomplete. When a society is deeply devoted to its gods and its religious traditions, it tends to bring them into nearly every aspect of its functioning (as well as its dysfunctioning), while often conveniently ignoring the loftiest precepts embodied by them. George Bush (father or son, it hardly matters) could listen to a sermon on Sunday in which Jesus' words, "Blessed are the peacemakers" are recounted, then order a carpet-bombing of Iraq or Afghanistan the same time next morning. A Muslim may memorize Koranic verses in which the killing of innocents is expressly condemned, then go and detonate his suicide vest in the middle of a wedding party. The unfortunate truth is that we derive strength and resolve from our religious devotions, even when we are doing things that aren't in the least bit compatible with the beliefs to which we professedly adhere. This is not the fault of imperfect religions, as much as it is the fault of the imperfect persons who practice (or even come to represent) them. It is the fact that we have trouble not discerning the hand of the divine in the selection of our leaders and the plight of our nations, that makes it so easy for us to blame our gods for failing our people, rather than blaming the people for failing their gods.

The tendency by which religion develops into mythology is really no different than that by which Old English became Middle and then Modern English, or the legging became the pantaloons, which became the trousers. You mustn't mistake the ephemerality of the form for the indispensability and immutability of the function. Mankind has always needed to speak, always needed to be clothed (according to its environment), and always needed to acknowledge and propitiate a power greater than itself. Likewise, it has always needed to modify and adapt its speech, clothing, and religion to the necessities and proclivities of the age in which it has found itself. We are a restless race; that's why my personal motto is *Nihil in Perpetuum Durat*, that is, "Nothing Endures Forever." It hardly matters what your opinion is of the externalities such as perennial requirements adopt, so long as you realize that their irrevocable importance to humanity goes undiminished. Religion is, at its most fundamental, an energy that resides in and passes through all people in all ages, and as such, it changes form, frequency, and intensity, but never entirely disappears. I believe it was Voltaire who said, "Even if God did not exist, it would be necessary for men to invent Him." It was, in any case, not the God he objected to, but the institution that claimed to represent Him. That is, an impermanent and putrefying institution representing a permanent and eternally vital idea.

I still see Christianity - in one form or another - as the religion most appropriate to our age. I try not to wonder very much about the truth behind such stories as the Virgin Birth, the various miracles, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and so forth, and I regard such legends as the Garden of Eden, Noah's Ark, Jonah and the Whale, etc., as symbolically valuable but theologically worthless, and intellectually

deleterious besides. I do believe that Jesus was a literal earthly manifestation of purest divinity - a perfectly-timed emanation from the Mind of the Divine, sent with the purpose of inspiring us to goodness, and directing us toward reunification with the Source. It may sound esoteric, but so is the expectation that we can make any sense out of the violence in the Middle East, or the mass starvation in Africa, or the incomprehensible and heartless greed that resulted in the worldwide recession and all its technological and financial antecedents. There are plenty of things that are too big for us to understand; that we must take one tiny morsel at a time, lest the antidote become the poison dose.



ON DIABOLISM

There are things that one may call egoism and narcissism, other than "Satanism." The Cult of the Self has been around for as long as selfish people have, i.e., since the dawn of the species - since the first act of pettiness, cruelty, or spite was performed by the first misanthropic lout. People believed in magic during society's pre-literate days too, and they certainly didn't call themselves Satanists. Even Anton LaVey had little reason not to refer to his skewed code of ethics as Nietzscheanism, Randism, or even Sadism (properly termed.) His only innovation, if it may be called that, was his retention of the Golden Rule that has appeared in every significant religious system for several millennia - "Do nothing to another that you would not like done to yourself."

If LaVeyanism had the backbone to be really egoistic, its creed would have been "Do what you want and pass off the consequences." You'll find that trying to straddle the line

between the supposed Miltonian nobility of the Satanist, as LaVey defined him, and the basic corner-market hold-up man, is too precarious an effort to be worth your while. A belief system of sheer convenience and anarchic caprice is nothing to be aspired to in itself; it is merely a *better* belief system fallen into wagging decrepitude.

The semantics of the matter are one thing. What must be established is the intent behind the lexicon - the real reason why anyone would bother to associate himself with the stigma of Satanism. To say that Satanism is a misunderstood religion, is quite like saying that Nazism is a misunderstood political view, or that White Supremacy is a misunderstood prejudice. We may be unable to understand them, simply because they are dubious from the outset, and they have never done their practitioners - or anyone else - any appreciable good. If an ideology does nothing to improve the state of either its adherents or society on the whole, how can it be either understood or rationally indulged?

As much as Satanism pretends - as Sadism did before it - to be nothing but a return to man's most innate and inviolable instincts, humanity has largely adopted the nobler or higher forms of ethics - those that call for mercy, empathy, and altruism - because it has seen its animal nature already, and has recoiled from it in shame and abhorrence. Satanism is a toothless tiger: it seeks to be intimidating without being disagreeable; it roars very fiercely from within a self-erected cage. To be both audacious and impotent is to be made a clown. It is asking for derision from a society that has little time left for pursuing dead ends and sheer cliffs.

Men are advanced by believing in things that are greater than they are; by aspiring to eventualities that actually *require* hope, perseverance, and goodwill. The successes of egoism may be recounted in the forms of Rockefeller, Carnegie, or Ford, but whatever their private successes, these are the men who have aided the world on its seemingly inalterable course of self-annihilation, and have subjected the populations of their own nations and countless others to unutterable squalor, exploitation, degeneracy, and despair. Without digressing too far off-base, gross industrialism is only one of the unmistakable examples of what can be expected when men act selfishly and short-sightedly, and when they promise general benefit from a platform of salacious self-interest.

Anton LaVey was never a sage, never a philosopher, and never a friend to anyone. He was a showman and an entrepreneur who degraded himself for the pernicious pleasure of watching others wallow with him into the dredges. LeVayan Satanism can hardly be called a religion, because unlike even the most elementary forms of paganism, there exists in it no possibility of either personal transcendence or external (supernatural) intervention. To propitiate oneself, so that one will act on one's own behalf, is too pointless and redundant to even be called hubristic by the most romantic of do-nothings. It is not even the blind leading the blind: it is the blind blundering alone.

THE END